

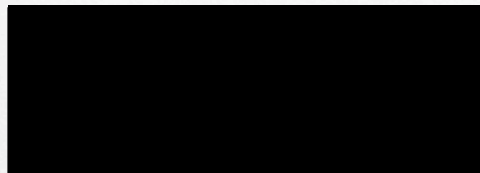
Klang and the Displace and Place

By Seoun Som

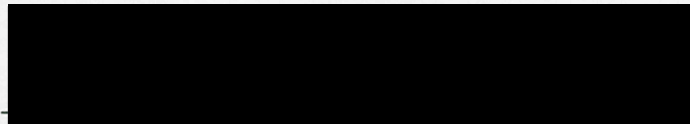
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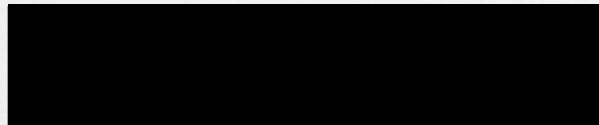
Approved by:



Committee Chair - Jeffrey Oliver Whetstone



Committee Member - elin o'Hara slavick



Committee Member - Hong-An Truong

Strathmore
PURE COTTON

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Abstract

This thesis project stems from my quest and ultimate failure of an identity; thus, leading to the questioning of identity itself. What does identity even mean? Does identity rest on the physical appearance; or is it grounded in place, culture, and traditions? How are notions of identities connected to the notions of “othering,” particularly, when we relate it to European colonizing histories? What becomes of identity in an era where there is much fluidity and overlapping cultures and diasporas? Though, these questions are complex and broad; my approach to answering these questions is grounded through the practice of generating art. When I make art, it is important for me to utilize various media. I consider my art practice to be interdisciplinary. I truly believe that art is about ideas. Through the making of art, I am questioning. Through the questioning, there is discovery, and through discovery is enlightenment, which leads to the marriage of both the formal and the conceptual understanding of my own creation.

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BACKGROUND- HISTORY

I was born in Serak Keo, a refugee camp in Thailand situated near the border of Cambodia. My parents are of Cambodian decent and are survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime of the middle to late 1970's. Through the conversations of both my parents and other survivors, I am informed of their struggles during this era. Their stories are vivid and horrific, as if it just happened yesterday. Similar to the light hitting film, the memory of this time is forever etched into their thoughts. Their stories are intriguing, dark, and sad. In some ways, their stories are etched into my mind. Like roadside mile markers, these thoughts are motivators to reach further and closer to a destination; a destination that is unknown and unfamiliar. I am not sure what the destination entails, but I know that art is the only way I know of getting there. Perhaps, art is the only way I know how to exist within the world, a world that is in a state on constant change.

When I was growing up in the refugee camp, like my parents, I remember photographically those experiences. I recall nostalgic memories of my childhood when I attended school organized by the United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and remember the joy felt when they soymilk truck came to deliver to a dose of protein.

I recall the aftermath of a monsoonal downpour awakening the fish and frog life in the shallows of a mud puddle. I remember trying to catch tadpoles and Siamese fighting fish in the puddles. I recall walking around makeshift markets, where ample amount of people were

trading fruits and vegetables. I even remember my brother and I walking along rows of bamboo huts looking for bee larvae located on the thatched sidings. This was not only a delicacy in this part of the world, but also a good source of protein. Although, these memories seem fond, one memory that really stands out alone is the United Nations Processing Center. I recall peering through a bamboo fence with its sharp angular points at the top. This marked a moment of hope and imagination. I imagined a place far greater than the one I was confined in, a better place. I was an outsider looking outwards, out of the shantytown that was the refugee camp. I wonder if this experience was a primer that led me to explore and live life as a transient?

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ARTIST STATEMENT

In my work, I use personal iconography as a starting point for my work. I strip my history as well as the art materials down to crucial elements, allowing for a greater, more universal understanding of my work without losing the integrity of personal and historical reference. As a transient, I switch between cultures and identities. In a way, I am a hybrid of many cultures and identities. This hybridity is reflected in work. My work addresses the connectivity between transients and those that are acclimated to a specific cultural identity. I use the notion of connectivity to refer to the exchange of ideologies between my perspectives against that of a dominating culture. For example, the perspective of a Cambodian Australian contrasted against the predominantly white culture of the United States. I am interested in the inquiry of my work and the exchange of thought that stems from it. The aspect of exchange is important to me as an artist because it provides a chance for the audience to question and answer his or her own identity.

In life, I navigate through many layers of cultural influence but have no grounding in any. With the increased blurring of diaspora lines and a greater populace of "transients," my work provokes thoughts about race, identity, culture, and social constructs in an increasingly heterogeneous world. I am interested in the problematic relationship of those ideas.

The idea of race is linked to colonial impulses and systems of othering. If we continue to discuss race as a component of identity, are we not perpetuating the continued existence of

racism? If the idea of culture is specific to a specific group, are we not categorizing? Are we ignoring the historical mobility of people in our histories? For instance, Southeast Asia, is comprised of many nationalities and ethnic groups, sharing many commonalities of food and tradition yet how is it that some foods are considered belonging to a specific culture? For example, the idea of the "Thai- hot pepper" belonging to Thailand is questionable! Are we not ignoring the mobility of people in our histories? The signification provides a farce understanding of identities and is linked in the political agenda of individual governments. Perhaps, nationalism could be the battle in our contemporary culture? How do I navigate for an identity in an era where people are in constant flight and moving from one place to another? I am curious in how my art manifests itself in different locales, and the conversations stemming from that.

KLANG (2012)

In my body of work titled, Klang, bamboo structures are tacked, suspended, and balanced in space and time. The title Klang is the Khmer word for kite. Like the word for kite in the English language, the word denotes both the kite as object and as a predatory bird.

The Klang structures are made out of three materials: bamboo, glue, and kite-string. The choice of material seems sparse and even minimal, but they are loaded with meaning and metaphors. Mimicry plays an important role in the selection of materials. It speaks of both the personal and universal. They form metaphorical connections between the personal experiences of a Cambodian living in the Western setting. In the works of Klang, the Cambodian of kite is mimicked by the use of materials found in the West. *(see Figure 1)

ALIEN, EXOTIC AND THE INTRODUCED

Bamboo has an ingrained association with Asia. Most of the bamboo used for this work is sourced locally around the Chapel Hill and Durham area. Bamboo is an introduced species to the area and is considered by the North Carolina Native Plant Society (NCNPS) to be an invasive species. Immigrants first introduced the bamboo to the area as ornamental plants. They are a reminder of the lands that they have left; they are a piece of home. Although, the notion of the alien, exotic, and the introduced has similarly but different meaning, they all mean the same when it comes to the bamboo. These notions describe my work. I am very interested in the idea of the alien and the exotic because it parallels the metaphors in work.

The species of bamboo used in this project are the *Bambusa* spp., and the *Phyllostachys* spp. The characteristics for both are similar however; the latter have a thicker wooden layer and a larger diameter and are considered more invasive of the two. The *Bambusa* grows in a clump, while the *Phyllostachys* spreads its roots and rhizomes at longer distances. The *Phyllostachys*, stands grand and majestically in comparison to the *Bambusa*. The common name for both is the exotic bamboo (NCNPS). *(see Figure 2-3)

The notion of the alien speaks directly to the kites and its interaction with the space it occupies. Aesthetically, they are organic looking structures. The curve lines create a flow that is pleasing to the viewer's eyes, and suggests many interpretations. Some of the readings include: sea creatures, microorganisms, a whale, and even an early flying device. The kite plays with the audience's imagination and conjures up experiences of their childhood.

SPACE

The objects vary in shape and size. Their length ranges from 5 feet long to 21 feet. The width of the objects ranges from 5 feet to 10 feet. The installation space itself is approximately 11 feet wide, 33 feet in length and 14 feet in height. A doorway located at 1/3 of the gallery separates the space. This separation provided a challenge to the installation. Not only did it provide a physical separation of space, but also it added the dilemma of bridging two very different mediums together in a manner that complimented both works. It was also an

opportunity for greater interaction with the architectural space. Still, the dilemma remains of the marriage of two distinctive mediums.

The coercivity of the two works is overcome by bridging the two spaces together. By using both object and sound the space is connected. Here, the largest kite hangs from the smaller gallery with its tail twisting and turning towards the clustering of the smaller kites located in the neighboring gallery. Additionally, the trickling sound from the video into the surrounding spaces provides the audience some context to the understanding of the kite objects.

OBJECT AND ITS RELATIONS

The installation of the kites is determined by its individual relationship to other kites and the architectural space. Logically, it would make sense to have the largest kite in a larger space, but by suspending it in tight confines brings attention to the architectural space as well as the scale and size of the individual kites. Some of the objects are pushed against the architecture to breaking point. Some kites are installed to continue the directional curves created by the outline of the kites, while others play off the intersecting points. The audience's eye is kept busy by following the lines of the kites, with moments of rest given by the kite's ribs located along the kite's spine. Some of the kites are wedged onto the walls using small camouflaging nails that match the natural patina of the bamboo. The areas in which the nails are driven into the walls are dictated by natural fall of the bamboo, this is where the object touches the wall. This allows for a material object to have its own voice. Further support is given by the use of a

14lbs monofilament wire. Also, some of the kites are installed protruding away from the wall by using a bamboo bracket. This bracket is created by using the same materials as the kites, and provides a seamless relationship between concept and form. It mimics and further accentuates the curvilinear and straight lines of the kites. *(see Figure 4- 5)

GEOGRAPHY AS IDENTITY

Traditionally, these kites were flown as a symbol to mark and welcome two very distinctive seasons, the wet and dry. The wet season starts in May; it begins the rice-growing season. The land is plowed and seedlings are planted into the wet marsh of the paddy fields. The start of the dry season begins in October; here the rice crops are drying and the rice harvesting begins, once again the kite is flown to mark a new phase. The kites are also flown as a way to connect to ancestors. It is often used as a ceremonial object and as an offering to the gods to help provide a good crop for the year.

The geographic location of Cambodia, can suggests why so many Cambodians are tied to the land. The land in Cambodia covers the size of Missouri, so it is not very large. Cutting through it is the Mekong River and its distributary, the Bassac River, which channels water away from the Mekong into the Tonle Sap Lake. The Tonle Sap is Southeast Asia's largest lake. Synched into the rhythm of the wet and dry season, the Tonle Sap increases and decreases its size dramatically. The cultivation of rice along the river and lake follows this pattern. *(see Figure 6)

COLLECTING, PROCESSING, FABRICATING

The process of sourcing the bamboo is laborious. I would drive around for hours into the different neighborhoods of Chapel Hill and Durham to scope out potential sources. Although, nerve reckoning and challenging; I was drawn to this process. There were moments when residents threatened to call the police, even though the area was covered with bamboo. This was absurd, because I really thought that I was doing them a favor by clearing out an invasive species. The search for bamboo was, in a sense, like the kite looking for prey. After relentless hours of driving, I finally found a house in which behind laid a forest of bamboo. It was like a spiritual revelation that hit me because it was at that very moment that I was in the process of making a three-point turn to head back home. I think as an artist, these moments of revelation are difficult to come by and it is important to cherish those moments when they occur. Those moments are often the fuel to get the artist to the next mile marker.

The process of shredding the bamboo to widths that were malleable took time, was consuming and repetitive. The bamboo was put into a band saw over and over again until it had a width that I could bend. Once, this was achieved, every triangular notch that is created at the segmented areas of the bamboo had to be cut. Both of these stages in their repetition provided me a moment of Zen. I am very drawn to this meditative state in my work process. This experiencing pattern is repeated over and over again in each stage of fabricating the work. The rhythm gave me groundwork to think about the Cambodian identity. I imagined the repetition to be like the repetitive action of planting rice, bent over and sowing the seedlings in

the rice fields. As I initially started making these kites as an attempt to connect with place and thus, identity, I never really thought I would draw a comparative physical experience. The process put me into a space that is both meditatively intuitive and strenuous at the same time.

The repetitive tying of the kite string is very methodical and its what is binding the entire structure together. The binding and tying method is precise and is the most deliberate hand-made element. If there were a punktem in my work, the binding and tying would be it. They are the junctures between the weakness and strength. These are the moments that hold the entire structure together. The string and the glue are in a symbiotic relationship. The glue acts as a temporary hold, thus is weak, while the string secures the joints tightly together. The process of binding is glue, string, and glue and is repeated over and over. The latter being the glue is used to hold the ends of the string down, thus the strong is also reliant on the weak.

The aesthetics of the installation in its simplicity is mysterious and possesses potentiality of time. The viewer is captured by the manifestation of lines and shadows. The optical blending of line, shape, and form is constantly shifting as the viewer moves within the space. The nest created in the clustering of the kites provokes associations. It suggests a familiarity, warmth, hominess, and a returning to roost. These are metaphorical associations that I am creating in this installation. They reflect a desire for place, grounded familiarity, and an identity.

PLATO'S ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

The kite objects installed are stripped of its ability to fly. There is no skin, no fabric, or paper to pick up atmospheric lift for flight. These kites are grounded, and only hint on the potentiality of flight, comparably to the idea that the men imprisoned in the cave have the potential to discover a world outside. The shadows hint at this allegory of the cave. Like the men imprisoned in the cave, their realities are only seen in the distorted shadows that are cast in the cave. They have never seen the light or world outside; so how can they comprehend it? This questioning provides not only a connecting metaphor to the reasoning of why the kites cannot be flown but it also reflects my experiences of identity. My experience of a Cambodian identity is navigated through the routes of Thailand, Australia and the United States. This is akin to having seeing the light before ever seeing the shadow. The kites are a failed attempt of identity. For me, perhaps, the kites are a stand-in for something else?

DISPLACED AND PLACE (2012)

This video titled: Displaced and Place is a 5:24 minute video installation in a gallery approximately 14 feet by 11 feet by 14ft height. A 60-inch flat screen television hangs on the wall facing the tomb of Mr. Ackland. *(see figure 7-8)

The video examines the failure and displacement of language through context. It also scrutinizes the loss of language through the removal of place. There is a back and forth connection between the displacement and isolation created through language against that of place. This video exhibits a conversation between two Cambodians characters that grew up in a Western context. The Western context results in the loss of language and their ability to communicate and perform correctly the Khmer language. In the sounds that they make, they also exhibit the influences of their Western environment. This idea of the loss of language is equivalent to the loss of identity. This loss is flipped and reversed back to the audience. The conversation primary in Khmer; leaves the audience to feel a sense of disconnection, while the scene provided both an entry and a distance of audience and place. The video was shot at the Mediterranean Deli in Chapel Hill and was chosen because not only is it familiar to the audience, but also it is a business that is predominantly patronized by white middle-class.

SETTING THE SCENE

The video's composition is organized using the convention of photography. Its composition is objective, frontal, simple, and balanced. The colors in the video are vibrant, saturated, warm, and inviting. The symmetry, and the details of the colorfully exotic objects subtly connect it to Renaissance Flemish painters. The scene is framed using elements of the composition, object, and space. The architectural lines create a three-dimensional depth in the space, while the window, window frame, the object flat-screen television, and the wall adds a further distance between audience and subject. This layering not only isolates but also provides an insider-outsider perspective. Towards the bottom left, hangs a lit neon sign saying, "open," indicating to the viewer that it is a business, a place of commerce, a social gathering spot. The neon sign is balanced by the middle-eastern lamp and rugs hanging on the right side of the frame. At the foreground is a planter pot, tables, wine and water glasses. The glasses balance the weight of the planter pots on the left. Just off center on top, spins a fan. Seated below are patrons sitting in different directions from one another. A group of three breaks up the repetition of pairs. The sound is a mixture of both ambience noise and of conversation. The conversation is in a foreign language and its origin is suggested by the video's subtitle. The subtitle gives the audience a point of access into the spoken language. At times, the subtitle length is short and the audience is reminded that they are an outsider. They also reference the experiences of listening to a language that we are not familiar; where everything spoken sounds fast.

PAST AND PRESENT

The title of the video *Displaced and Place* provides the audience with clues to experiencing the work. The notion of *Displaced* hints at the thoughts of citizenship, mobility, changing of perception, and loss of cultural identities. *Place*, hints at a memory and the loss of the familiarity and desire of returning. It also suggests the actual scene in the video. The scene, balances between the exotic and that of the familiar. However, as the audience watches on, any sense of familiarity is interrupted by the jarring unfamiliarity of Khmer language. This unfamiliarity of language can only be accessed by reading the subtitles and thus lacks contextual grounding that would enable a full understanding of what is being spoken. Therefore, the dialogue becomes a nonsensical. Additionally, the unpredictable references further pushes the nonsensicality of language.

HUMOR AS AN ENTRY

The random mention to food and place hints at desire while injecting humor into the piece. Humor provides the viewer an entry point into the isolating dialogue. The text translating the “Umm” and “Err” sounds brings in a familiar context to the video. This brings the audience back to language; and poses the question of why the artist is bringing attention to those sounds. Those moments indicate that the speaker is either lacking the vocabulary to translate their thoughts, or that there is not a word for which there is an equivalent.

Additionally, it could also be an indication that they are thinking in English but are failing to find the connection in the Khmer language. Thus, the intonation of the English sounds of the umm and err.

FINDING PLACE IN FOOD

The random reference of food points to place, desire, and nostalgia. Food evokes memories that are connected to the senses: sight, smell, taste, and touch. The injection of the text about the Vegemite on toast is specific to Australia and can conjure up a negative response. It is one of those foods that are an acquired taste. On the other hand, the Lamb on a spit and its delicious crispy skin suggests something more European, specifically, the Mediterranean. These moments reference my own experiences of place through food. In my past video work titled: Isolation (2009), food was used as a way to connect to the viewer, to conjure conversations about their identity and nostalgia that came along with it.

ON INFLUENCE

The influences in my work are varied; some of them relate to architecture while others engage with the contemporary social issues. The artists that I am attracted to tend to be those whose artistic practice involves both social and political issues with an artistic endeavor. Finding the commonality between these the two provides a platform in which we can discuss and question our differences. This for me this is the power of art!

The Bauhaus movement resonates with me a lot, especially when I think about the aesthetics of my work. Similar to the Bauhaus drive to marry art, craft and design, my aesthetics marries concept with aesthetics. I tend to think minimally and ask myself what is the most potent material that would be suggestive of my ideas but would not hit the audience's head with it. I like subtlety with potency. Thus, my aesthetics tends to be clean, minimal, and contemplative. This quality is reflected in both the Klang and the video work.

The photographic aesthetic is apparent in my work, especially when composition is involved. I speak of composition in both the two-dimensional form as well as the three-dimensional (installation). For instance, the Klang installation is balanced. A busy forested clustering in one side of the room is balanced with the softness of the shadow in the other.

Some of the artist that I am interested in are Pierre Huyghe, Robert Moss, Dinh Q. Le., Shirin Neshat, An-My Le, Henrique Oliveira, and Rirkrit Tirvanija. Although, their artistic approach is different, I find a common thread between their work and mine. Their works present the conflict of today's contemporary society. They are a cross section between the personal and the universal. For instance, Richard Mosse's photography combines his personal interest of the photographic medium with the politics of Iraq and Congo's war. Oliveira's installation uses sheets of painted plywood from development sites in his native Sao Paulo to have a conversation about the social issues surrounding the growth of developing countries. My Klang work parallels this idea. The bamboo structure is associated with Asia but the overall aesthetics expresses a Western sensibility.

CONCLUSION

At this point my practice, my work, presents itself through a series of questioning identity. Identity, and the questioning that surrounds it, is at the heart of the transient contemporary societies that we exist in. Our histories, traditions, cultures, and ideologies are transferred from one place to another. Societies are homogenized. Who do we become in an era where identity is no longer? Although, the questioning of identity has led me to this stage of my practice, the next is to ask what do I do with the non-identity? What becomes of one's practice when identity is no longer a question but a being? This is the direction I am heading in my artistic practice.

APPENDIX

Figure 1- Klang Installation



Figure 2- Bambusa spp.



Figure 3- Phyllostachys spp.



Figure 4- Klang (brackets)

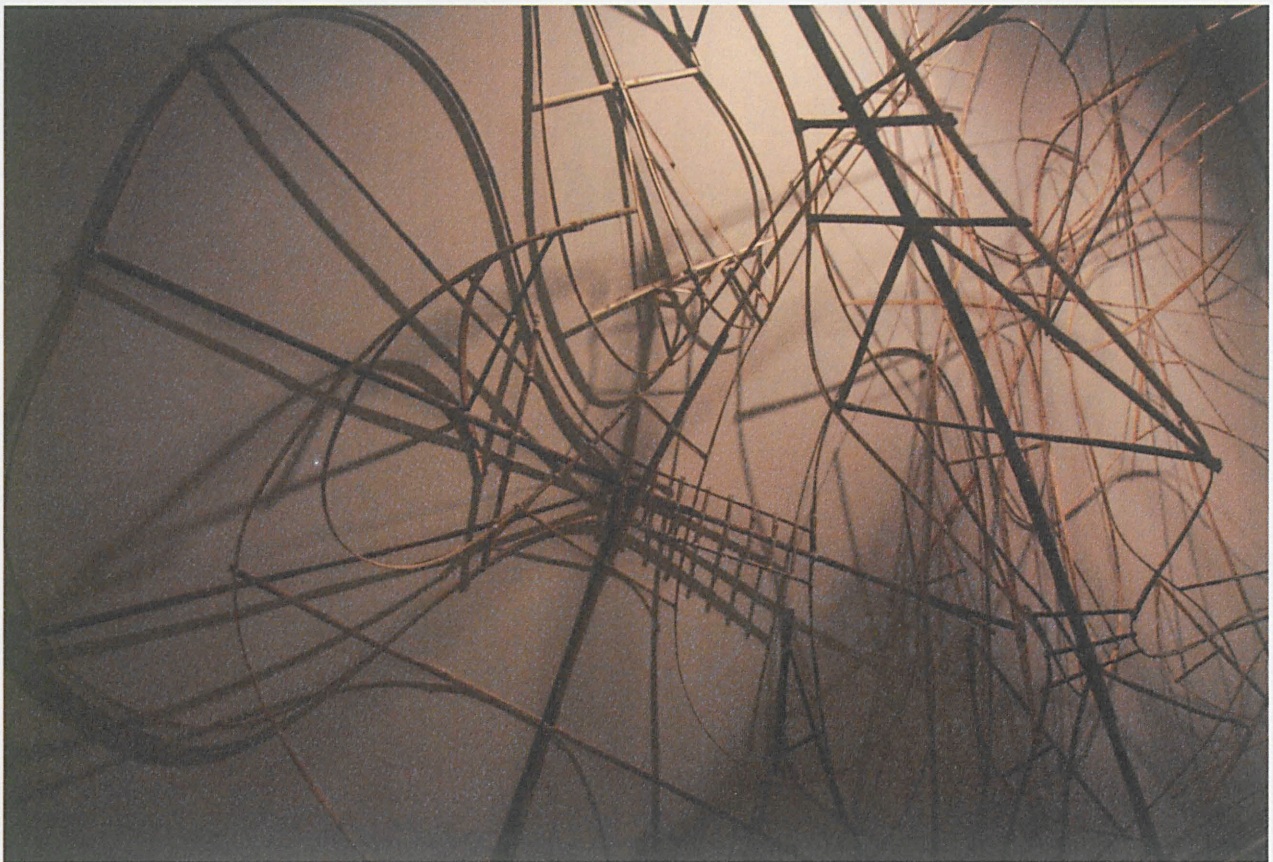


Figure 5- Skeletal Structure of the Klang

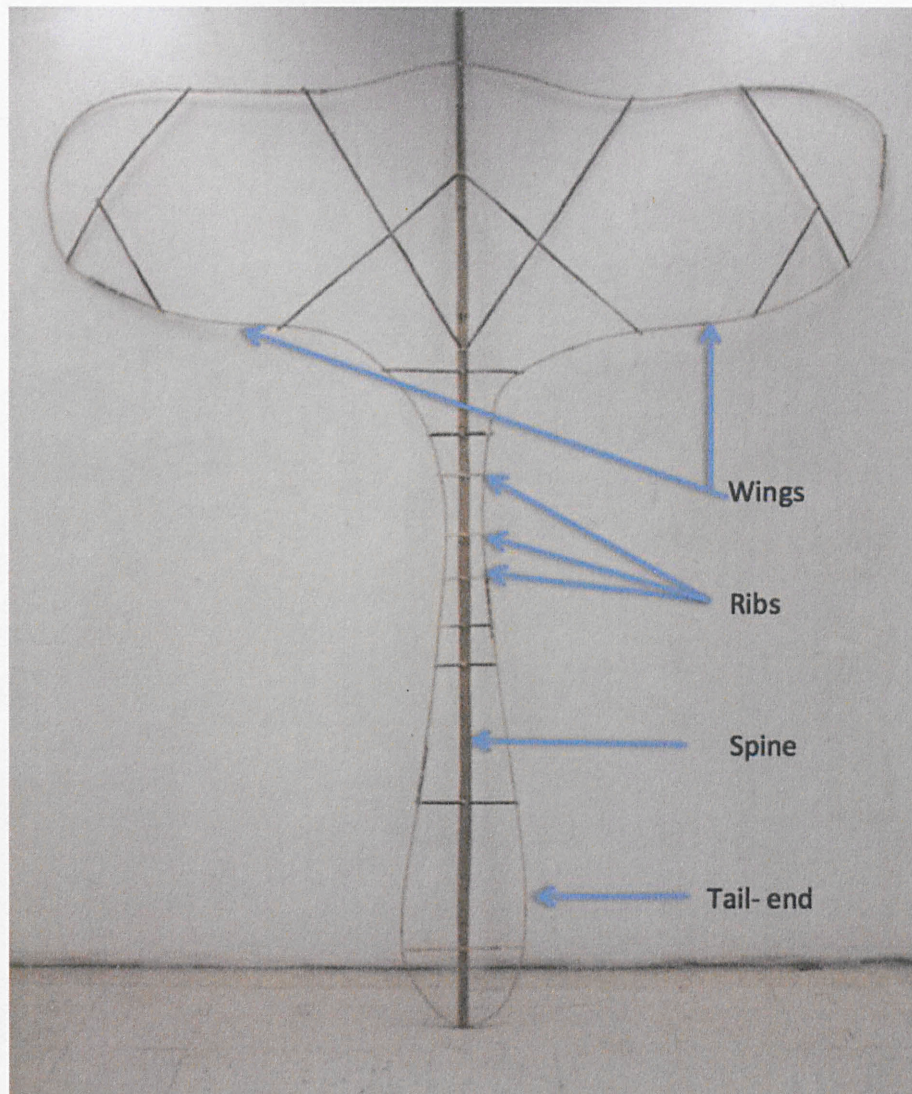


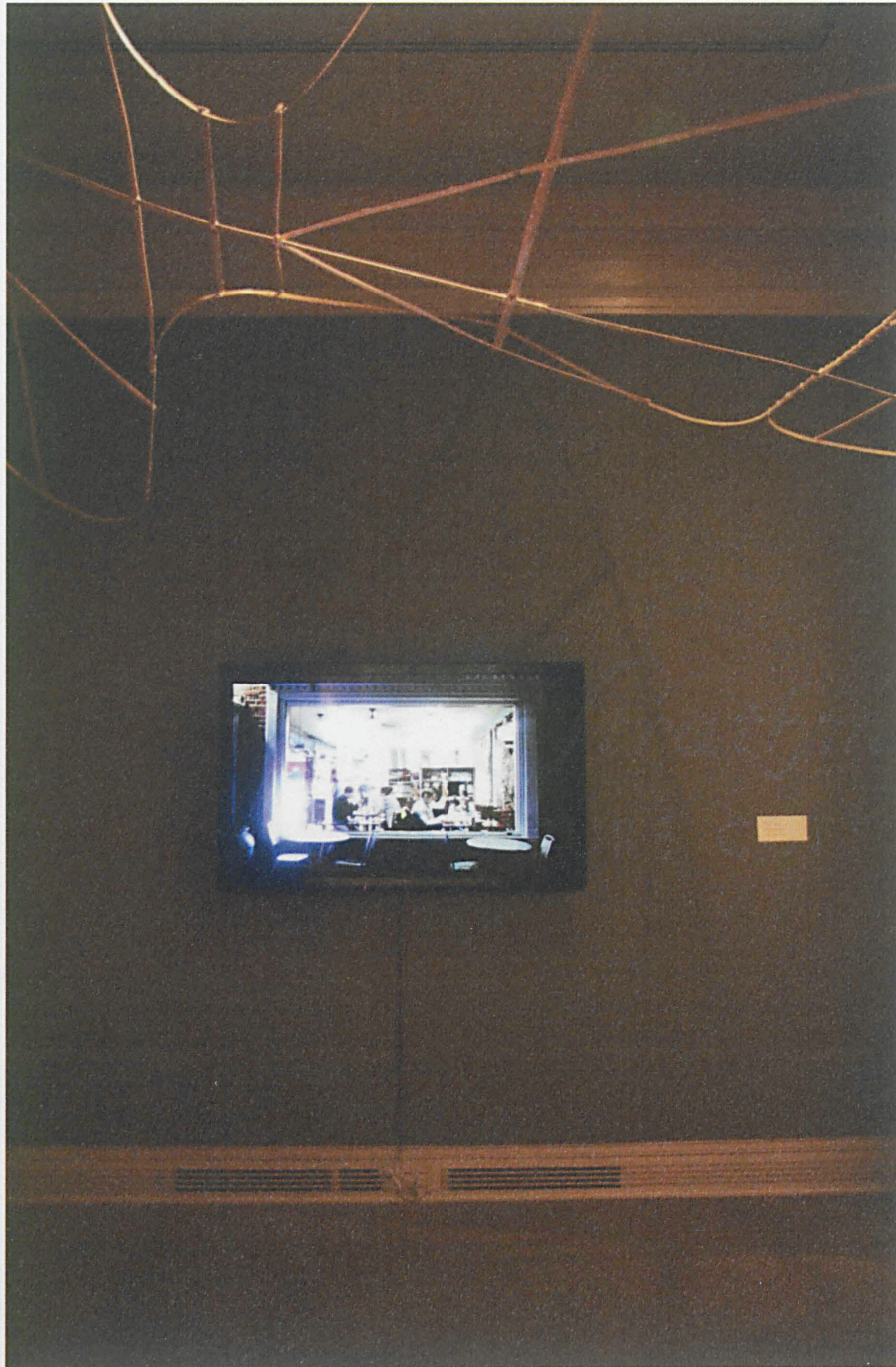
Figure 6- Geographic Map of Cambodia



Figure 7- Displaced and Place Video



Figure 8- Displaced and Place (Frontal Installation shoot)



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